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Review Essays

America Unbound
by Richard M. Gamble

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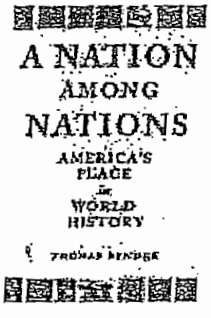
Robert Kagan, *Dangerous Nation: America's Place in the World from Its Earliest Days to the Dawn of the 20th Century*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006. 544 pp., $30.

Thomas Bender, *A Nation Among Nations: America's Place in World History*. New York: Hill and Wang, 2006. 384 pp., $26, $15, paper.



America's "place in the world" has preoccupied interpreters of the American identity for hundreds of years. Well before George Berkeley celebrated British North America as "time's noblest offspring," America's destiny as the last empire in civilization's inexorable march to the west had become a

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commonplace among poets, philosophers, theologians, and historians in Europe and America.[1] Americans themselves could not resist the flattery of such prophecies of national greatness. The Radical Republican Senator Charles Sumner, for instance, discerned in the history of the United States nothing less than the foreshadowing of a secular millennium. He claimed in 1874 that:

> The discovery of America by Christopher Columbus is the greatest event of secular history. Besides the potato, the turkey, and maize, which it introduced at once for the nourishment and comfort of the Old World, and also tobacco, which only blind passion for the weed could place in the beneficent group, this discovery opened the door to influences infinite in extent and beneficence. Measure them, describe them, picture them, you cannot. While yet unknown, imagination invested this continent with proverbial magnificence. It was the Orient and the land of Cathay. When afterwards it took a place in geography, imagination found another field in trying to portray its future history. If the Golden Age is before, and not behind, as is now happily the prevailing faith, then indeed must America share at least, if it does not monopolize, the promised good.[2]

Gilded Age Americans were not alone in making such grand claims about America's ordained role in world progress. Writing of his travels through the United States in 1868, the English parson Foster Barham Zincke offered a naturalistic explanation for America's dazzling "progressiveness and enterprise." Searching for the origin of that spirit, he traced back through history what was to his mind a self-evident outworking of natural selection. Through a deterministic "winnowing and sifting," the "strongest" and therefore by definition the "best" races had continuously selected from within themselves this "impulse to move on." Zincke used America's success as a lens through which to read the meaning of Western civilization in its entirety: "All other series of events—as, for instance, that which resulted in the culture of mind in Greece, and that which resulted in the empire of Rome—only appear to have purpose and value when viewed in connection with it, or rather as subsidiary to it. Their true place in history is that of affluents to this main stream."[3]

No less an authority than British naturalist Charles Darwin concurred with Zincke's account of America's success. He claimed that "there is apparently much truth in the belief that the wonderful progress of the United States, as well as the character of the people, are the results of natural selection; for the more energetic, restless, and courageous men from all parts of Europe have emigrated during the last ten or twelve generations to that great country, and

[1] For a full treatment of this theme see Jan Willem Schulte Nordholt's *The Myth of the West: America as the Last Empire*, translated by Herbert H. Rowen (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1995).

[2] Charles Sumner, *Prophetic Voices Concerning America* (Boston: Lee and Shepherd, 1874), p. 1.

[3] F. Barham Zincke, *Last Winter in the United States* (Freeport, N.Y.: Books for Libraries, 1970 [1868]), pp. 26–30.

have succeeded best." At this point he quoted Zincke's claim that the "purpose and value" of Greece and Rome were evident only as "subsidiary" to the Anglo-Saxon movement to the west.[4] This whole section from Darwin's *Descent of Man*, moreover, reappeared in 1885 in the bestseller *Our Country*, a plea by the American social gospel clergyman Josiah Strong that his nation carry on its civilizing mission to spread civil liberty and true "spiritual Christianity." "Mr. Darwin," Strong wrote, "is not only disposed to see, in the superior vigor of our people, an illustration of his favorite theory of natural selection, but even intimates that the world's history thus far has been simply preparatory for our future, and tributary to it."[5]

Sumner, Zincke, Darwin, and Strong applied to the United States some of the most egregious instances conceivable of what the Cambridge historian Herbert Butterfield called "the Whig interpretation of history." Such an interpretative method, he wrote in 1931, aims "to produce a story which is the ratification if not the glorification of the present." The conscientious historian, however, ought to resist the temptation of "making the past our present." The danger of such a fallacy is that "when we organise our general history by reference to the present we are producing what is really a gigantic optical illusion." This conjurer's trick uses only those past events and people and ideas that look most like us and seem to "foreshadow" the present. Guided by this principle of selection and exclusion, the Whig historian tells a simplified, overly dramatic story of the triumph of progress over reaction. The careful historian ought first to seek out "unlikenesses" between his own time and the past, Butterfield urged. By doing so he is far more likely to avoid "rash analogies" and exaggerated similarities, far better equipped to recover a finely textured past open to inconvenient facts, messiness, and irony.[6]

Robert Kagan's most recent book, *Dangerous Nation*, while it synthesizes a mountain of secondary material into a skillful narrative, presents a version of the American past that is precisely "the ratification if not the glorification of the present" that Butterfield warned about. Its objective is clearly to ratify a particular foreign policy. This objective becomes obvious once *Dangerous Nation* is compared against *Present Dangers*, the book Kagan co-edited with William Kristol in 2000.[7] Kagan provides historical justification for the "conservative internationalism" he and Kristol advocated then. According to the editors,

[4] Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man and Selection in Relation to Sex*, new edition, revised and augmented (New York: Appleton, 1896 [1874]). This section was unchanged from the original 1871 edition.

[5] Josiah Strong, *Our Country: Its Possible Future and Its Present Crisis* (New York: Baker & Taylor, 1885), pp. 170–71.

[6] Herbert Butterfield, *The Whig Interpretation of History* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1965), pp. 12, 16, 21, 29, 37, 103, and *passim*.

[7] Robert Kagan and William Kristol, eds., *Present Dangers: Crisis and Opportunity in American Foreign and Defense Policy* (San Francisco: Encounter Books, 2000). See especially their co-authored preface and introduction, pp. vii–x, 3–24.

"conservative internationalism" meant "a strong commitment to vigorous American global leadership, to American power, and to the advancement of American democratic and free-market principles abroad." At that time Kagan and Kristol feared that the United States risked losing its global hegemony "in a fit of absentmindedness, or parsimony, or indifference." America's unprecedented military might and the power of its ideals gave it the capacity, consistent with both its security and its ideology, to transform the world in its own image. Its pole star ought to be nothing less than "a broad strategy of promoting liberal democratic governance throughout the world." The thing America must not do, Kagan and Kristol pleaded, was to seek to be a "normal" nation after the Cold War, a merely reactive nation guided by a narrow vision of its national interest divorced from its ideology.[8]

Now in *Dangerous Nation* Kagan substantially reads back into American history a precedent for these policies. Modern conservative internationalism is, in this telling, true to the best of the nation's founding and guiding principles. Those who dissent from the American empire today rely on a fabricated history about an America that never existed and a foreign policy tradition that has never been followed—or at least not followed for the assumed reasons. Contrary to persistent myth, America has not been historically wedded to principles of isolation, non-entanglement, and neutrality. It has not been non-ideological, aloof, peaceful, and reactive. It has not been merely a model to be emulated. Rather, it has been an ambitious, aggressive force to be reckoned with, a threat to its ideological and strategic adversaries. America rose to power not by accident but by deliberate choice and by the imperatives of a universalist ideology. In answer to the myth, Kagan writes, "This book is an attempt to tell a different story that is more about expansion and ambition, idealistic as well as materialistic, than about isolationist exemplars and cities upon hills." America has always been, ought to be, and inevitably will be a "dangerous nation" in a world filled with autocratic regimes. Kagan takes this provocative description from John Quincy Adams, the book's hero, who wrote in 1817 that the European powers feared a united America would "become a very dangerous member of the society of nations."

To destroy the myth and recapture America's authentic "place in the world," Kagan argues for a strong thread of continuity within American history. He explores key episodes over the course of nearly three hundred years of the American experience, from seventeenth-century colonization through to the birth of America's own overseas empire at the end of the nineteenth. He traces this pattern of expansion and ambition, both realist and idealist, right down to the Spanish-American War, at which point his narrative breaks off in anticipation of the second volume. Within this large and complex story, however, Kagan cycles repeatedly through three unifying arguments: that America was founded on Enlightenment principles and driven forward by

[8] *Present Dangers*, pp. viii, 4, 5, 6, 12, 17, and *passim*.

Promethean ambition; that its foreign policy has always been ideological; and that this ideological foreign policy has made America safer.

In emphasizing the Enlightenment, and indeed mostly the secular, radical Enlightenment, Kagan defines the American founding by its most modern features. America did not emerge organically from an inherited past but rather was born in a truly revolutionary moment in pursuit of an innovative "liberal worldview" energized by Enlightenment principles, Lockean natural rights, and an expansive ideological universalism. America's birth marked "a separation from the past and a departure into the future." In Kagan's truncated version of the story, America's identity embodies secular, progressive, acquisitive modernity and little else; it looks forward and never back. Indeed, the colonists "had brought with them not merely a European culture but a new way of viewing human nature, a view shaped by Locke, by the Scottish Enlightenment, by Adam Smith, and by the new 'science' of political economy." The founders, too, "shared the prevailing Enlightenment faith in liberal progress," and "American ideas of progress . . . were rooted not in religion but in the secular ideas of the Enlightenment."

Thanks to the Declaration of Independence, America built this ideology into something unique in the world: a deracinated "universalistic nationalism" tied no longer to ancestry, or place, or history, or culture, but only to an idea. The new nation built its foreign policy on this "universalistic worldview," looking forward to "republican transformation in other lands . . . as a matter of moral and ideological principle." Europe's conservative regimes in the eighteenth century recognized the implications of this worldview. The inexorable force of America's political, religious, and economic liberalism dissolved traditional societies, making the new nation the darling of the Enlightenment's most radical innovators and inspiring revolutionaries elsewhere in the New World and the Old to throw off the shackles of the past. The nation's foreign policy became an extension of this ideological commitment to Enlightenment liberalism. From as early as Washington's first administration, the debate over foreign policy between the emerging Hamiltonians and Jeffersonians, between pro-British and pro-French factions, was not a dispute between realists and idealists, not a contest between a non-ideological and an ideological strategy, but an intensely ideological battle within a liberal consensus for "the very soul of the republic."

In the post-Napoleonic era, Americans became "more committed than ever to the Enlightenment ideals of human progress and individual rights" as their nation engaged in a "Cold War-style global confrontation" between republicanism and reactionary autocracy. Kagan's Cold War analogy is telling. It leads him to divide the post-Napoleonic world into two ideologically armed camps locked in a "global" contest for dominance. Europe's conservative governments were nothing less than a "foretaste of the totalitarianism that would emerge full-blown in the twentieth century." Moreover, he observes, these regimes "were not wrong to view the United States as dangerous. The

republic was an inspiration to revolutionaries in Europe and Latin America, and American leaders and citizens actively supported liberal revolution, materially in the case of Spanish America, rhetorically in the case of Europe." Though unsuccessful, Henry Clay's rallying for Greek independence and for Latin American revolutions manifested the persistence of ideology in foreign policy. John Quincy Adams as well, despite his oft-quoted warning in 1821 against crusading "in search of monsters to destroy" and his reputation for restraint and realism, "believed in the primacy of ideology in international affairs." America matched its universalism against the Holy Alliance's own universalism, its doctrine of natural rights against "proto-totalitarian" autocratic regimes. Accordingly, for both Metternich and Monroe "the global ideological struggle knew no natural, geographical boundaries." Contrary to the myth, the point of the Monroe Doctrine, therefore, was not to announce isolation but "to draw ideological distinctions" between two incompatible systems of government.

In the decades leading up to the Civil War, moreover, "as American power and influence grew, so did Americans' tendency to press their own principles on the world around them. And in a world where geopolitics and ideology were deemed inseparable, the spread of American-style government offered a reconciliation of power, self-interest, and principle." Thus, after the Civil War, in Kagan's topsy-turvy version of American history, the Democrats take on the role of the true innovators as they accuse Republicans of pursuing "a dangerous departure from hallowed American traditions." President Grover Cleveland in particular sought to return to a mythical "conservative" Founding tradition of non-interventionism, isolationism, and non-ideological realism when in fact his policy would have realigned the United States with the marginalized position of the Antifederalists and such early dissenters from empire as John Randolph.

While arguing that an ideologically driven foreign policy was authentic to America's founding principles, Kagan also emphasizes that such a policy was unavoidable for any nation in the nineteenth century and that it in fact made the United States safer. Consistent with a main point in *Present Dangers*, Kagan marshals historical evidence to prove that, in practice, ideology and security could not have been separated. Indeed, "American liberalism was inherently entangling." Monarchies pursued ideological foreign policies consistent with their constitutional or absolutist principles. Republics were no exception. "National security and national ideology were indissolubly linked." Like any other power, the United States combined "ideology, security, and foreign policy." Only the embarrassing contradiction of the slaveholding South stood in the way of the nation's universalist ideology and its mission to export democracy.

Relying heavily on political theorist Harry Jaffa's framework, Kagan repeatedly identifies the South as "proto-totalitarian," thereby preordaining his argument's trajectory through the sectional crisis and into the Civil War. Seeing "likenesses" (in Butterfield's sense) where he ought to be more alert to

differences, Kagan groups the "despotic" South with Europe's totalitarian precursors. Kagan's predisposition sets him in stark opposition to the conclusions of Eugene Genovese, the preeminent historian of the slaveholding South. To Genovese, the South's fierce anti-statism and opposition to total war makes any superficial correlation between totalitarianism and the Southern mind absurd. "From George Mason to John Randolph to Calhoun and on to Weaver and Bradford," Genovese writes, "every southern conservative of note has recoiled from the tenets that became fundamental to fascism."[9] Indeed, the Southern essayist Richard Weaver pointed to an inconvenient fact about the twentieth-century South and fascism: "That the South was the first section of the United States to sense an enemy in fascism was indicated not only by the polls of opinion, but also by its ardor in preparing for the fight." Southerners rejected centralism, which Weaver described as pointing to an alliance between the masses as such and a single leader purporting to be their champion, and they defined the choice posed by fascism as one between "a world illuminated by religious and poetical concepts and made human by respect for personality, and a world of materialism and technology, of an ever greater feeding of the physical man, which is nihilism."[10]

Kagan, however, presents a simpler and flatter story to fit his purpose. Having joined the South and totalitarianism, he draws the inevitable parallel to the kind of foreign policy demanded in common by such regimes: "For the slaveholders, as for the absolutist powers of Europe, the mere existence of free nations in close proximity constituted a potentially fatal threat." The strategic interests of both groups "lay in diminishing the areas of freedom around them. Dangerous pockets of liberty had to be destroyed." "Expansion and conquest," he repeats later, gave the paranoid South "a means of eliminating threats posed by free territories on its borders." Kagan runs about as far as he can with the Republican Party's claim that the United States was about to become all slave. Had the South prevailed, the United States as a whole would have become a totalitarian regime. In this ahistorical paradigm, the Civil War becomes "America's first experiment in ideological conquest" and Reconstruction "America's first experiment in 'nation-building.'" Obscuring the South's considerable contributions to the history and culture that formed the American identity, Kagan claims that the North's victory in "the Civil War provided the example of an aggressive war of conquest to implant American principles in a civilization that had manifestly rejected them." Thus with breathtaking ease Kagan consigns entire cultures to the dustbin of history.

The structure of Kagan's argument preordains that the North's triumph in 1865 cannot mark the birth of an essentially new kind of American nation no

[9] Eugene D. Genovese, *The Southern Tradition: The Achievement and Limitations of an American Conservatism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), pp. 89–94.

[10] Richard M. Weaver, "The South and the Revolution of Nihilism," *South Atlantic Quarterly*, April 1944.

matter how much the war revolutionized the South. On the contrary, the Civil War restored the authentic America, removed the impediment of an increasingly un-American South, and opened the way for America's historic revolutionary impulse to spread liberal democracy abroad and transform the world. In short, "struggles for liberty elsewhere depended on the triumph of liberty at home." With the South's defeat, a nation that had always been an exporter of liberal ideology was free once again to wage its historic battle for "liberty elsewhere." For Lincoln, the prism through which Kagan interprets all of American history, "the core of American nationhood was a set of universal principles that transcended national boundaries." These core principles, most notably equal rights, emanated from Jefferson's Declaration of Independence, the end to which the Union and even the Constitution served as means.

That the battle for "liberty elsewhere" had resumed became evident in the Spanish-American War. Historian Walter McDougall argued in *Promised Land, Crusader State* that 1898 marked the dividing line between an "Old Testament" and "New Testament" in U.S. foreign policy guided by two distinct sets of principles.[11] Similarly, Norman Graebner argued that the United States moved in 1898 from a predominant (not exclusive) realism to a predominant (not exclusive) humanitarian idealism. Prior to 1898, humanitarian motives "had never governed action."[12] In Kagan's judgment, however, America did not shift from a non-ideological to an ideological foreign policy, from realism to idealism, from self-interest to humanitarian crusading at the end of the nineteenth century. U.S. foreign policy has always been driven by a "New Testament" canon of Enlightenment universalism and political and economic liberalism. While the war with Spain may indeed have marked a departure in the degree of American engagement with the world, "it was also a culmination, the not-illogical result of all that had come before it."

Citing McKinley's war message, Kagan argues that the president went to war in 1898 primarily on behalf of "a moral and humanitarian imperative." In this regard Kagan does not differ from McDougall, Graebner, and others. The difference comes with Kagan's insistence that the war to liberate Cuba marks the fulfillment, not the betrayal, of America's principles. "As part of a long tradition of American leaders, [McKinley] appealed to the country's universalist nationalism, and as a member of the Civil War generation and a Lincoln Republican, he insisted it was "no answer to say that this is all in another country, belonging to another nation, and is therefore none of our business. . . . It is specially our duty, for it is right at our door." "Too few," he continues in the book's concluding paragraph, "have seen or perhaps have

[11] Walter A. McDougall, *Promised Land, Crusader State: The American Encounter with the World Since 1776* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1997).

[12] Norman A. Graebner, *Ideas and Diplomacy: Readings in the Intellectual Tradition of American Foreign Policy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), p. 339. In the chapter title to this section of his book, Graebner calls America a "reluctant world power."

wanted to see how the war was a product of deeply ingrained American attitudes toward the nation's place in the world." These attitudes reach back to the Puritans' "City on a Hill," to a particular universalist gloss on the Declaration of Independence, and to the "moral crusade" of the Civil War that continued to serve in the 1890s as a "model of a 'selfless' war on behalf of 'humanity' and 'civilization.'"

The opening of the Spanish-American War, then, confirmed America's place in the world, namely, "who the American people were and what they had made of their nation." That identity will no doubt be confirmed as Kagan's second volume recounts how America fought to liberate Cuba, suppressed insurrection in the Philippines, intervened in the First and Second World Wars, and defeated the Soviet Union. He will continue his ratification of conservative internationalism, a foreign policy for the twenty-first century that seeks "benevolent global hegemony," topples regimes hostile to "liberal democratic civilization," continues to unite national interests and ideology in moralizing and doctrinaire foreign policy, and fears a "return to normalcy."[13] It is hoped that he will also consider the best arguments from the most articulate and thoughtful anti-imperialists, including such forceful critics as William Graham Sumner, for whom 1898 indeed marked a departure from and anything but a ratification of the American founding.

While Kagan champions universalism as the key to America's rightful place in the world, historian Thomas Bender sets out in *A Nation Among Nations* to remedy Americans' inability to think outside their own context and from the point of view of other cultures. Kagan and Bender are both internationalists, but Bender is clearly a liberal internationalist who finds kinship not with John Quincy Adams but with the prominent American progressive internationalist and social reformer Jane Addams. Bender aims at nothing less than a totally "reframed" American historical narrative. He contends that the nation-state as a unit of historical analysis is simultaneously too small and too large to give an accurate picture. Instead, he favors a comparative approach that places the development of the United States into the global context of other colonies, nations, and empires. He devotes most of the book to capturing this larger story through, in his metaphor, a wide-angle lens. But along the way he also looks at human associations smaller than the nation. By smaller he does not generally mean local geographic regions but rather categories of race, class, and gender. While this narrower focus can become a bit forced and predictable, and the jargon a bit too trendy, Bender's larger perspective opens up multiple vantage points from which to judge exactly what is and is not unique and determinative about America's place in the world. America appears to have more in common with other peoples than the conventional exceptionalist story has led most Americans to expect. Weaving America into a

[13] See Kagan and Kristol's introduction to *Present Dangers*, pp. 3–24.

massive web of unfamiliar detail, Bender shows what America looks like when viewed in the context of five episodes in global history over the past five hundred years: as a collection of colonies among colonies in the midst of the "oceanic revolution" that touched every part of the world; as the product of a revolution among revolutions; as a nation refashioned in an age of romantic nation-building; as an empire among empires; and as a modernizing industrial democracy that struggled with the same social stresses that afflicted the rest of the modern world.

Similarities among nations matter more to Bender than most differences. He identifies himself as a "lumper" and tries to spot "family resemblances" that raise important questions about exactly why things turned out the way they did in America. In doing so, he refuses to tell history proleptically, that is, as if he knows the end of the story from the beginning. In discussing early Manhattan, for instance, he treats the Dutch colony not as proto-American but as part of the Netherlands' trading empire, as what it was and not as what it would become. He is also alert to paradox and to unintended consequences, and his sensitivity to context allows him to tell a story that isn't too tidy. His aim in all of this, he acknowledges, is to produce globally aware citizens who are "at once proud nationals and humble citizens of the world." Globalism, however, seems to equal progress and enlightenment for Bender. He too easily assumes that knowledge of global history will lead automatically to tolerance and social solidarity among the world's peoples. He even applauds recent efforts by some U.S. Supreme Court justices to measure the Constitution and American law against a global consensus, chastising Antonin Scalia for "complain[ing] that 'foreigners' should not have any role in interpreting the Constitution." Bender writes self-consciously as a progressive in search of a usable past, but even those who disagree with his ideology or his hopes for globalism will be provoked into asking new questions about the American identity.

Global history is unavoidable when dealing with the United States, Bender argues. In making his case, he develops two entwined points. First, "that global history commenced when American history began." And second, that "American history cannot be adequately understood unless it is incorporated into that global context." From roughly 1500 onward, national histories became international histories. He desires Americans to see themselves simply as one people, one "province," among many and to see themselves as others see them. Even "such distinctively American events as the Revolution and the Civil War" take on greater clarity in a "global context." He does not promote "post-national history" but rather national histories told in a broader context—the only context, in fact, in which they can be properly told, for "the nation cannot be its own historical context.". This is a reasonable proposition. At the very least this technique ought to help historians ask the vital question, "Compared to what?" Bender's results prove that "spatial" context can lead to the same sorts of surprising revelations that historians already expect from chronological context.

Every chapter in *A Nation Among Nations* tips familiar events and people into a new perspective, in the way an M. C. Escher drawing leads the viewer's eye in and out of corridors and up and down staircases that keep looping back into each other. Bender's most provocative chapter tackles the Civil War as an episode in what he calls the "mid-century 'federative crisis.'" Romantic nationalism propelled this crisis and insisted on national consolidation as the key to liberal reforms and to economic progress. Almost simultaneously, it reshaped the histories of the United States, Germany, Italy, and the Austro-Hungarian Empire. This "newer notion of nationalism, which envisioned homogeneous states, was circulating in the Atlantic world," Bender writes. "Leaders of the new Republican Party, especially William Henry Seward of New York and Abraham Lincoln of Illinois, incorporated this vision of nationhood into their thinking, and that led to a presumption that the future United States would be either all free or all slave—a unitary nation rather than a divided and balanced confederation."

Unification and national independence movements in the nineteenth century, whether successful like Germany's and Italy's or unsuccessful like Hungary's, relied on a mix of romantic nationalism, extension of liberalism, and consolidation of centralized state power, though not always to the same degree or proportion or with the same results. The pattern of national unification varied from context to context, of course. While Lincoln managed, in Bender's judgment, to combine nationalism and liberalism, Bismarck drove the two apart and achieved an "illiberal unification of Germany." Nevertheless, events in the United States formed part of a worldwide conflict among nationalism, liberalism, and economic modernization. These new nation-states manifested a common "desire for more effective administration, for stronger armed forces, and for positive powers of state intervention and modernization (often meaning the advance of industrialization)." Lincoln and Seward interpreted their war—or waged their war—as part of the "larger international liberal movement of their time." Seward, "like other Republicans, envisioned a modern American state (and perhaps modernity in general) as the North writ large, realizing the European ideals of 1848 and fulfilling American democracy."

While by no means sympathetic to the Confederate cause, Bender nevertheless concedes that the South got some things right about the nature of the conflict. The war was indeed the product of a particularly virile form of romantic nationalism with Lincoln and the Republican Party at the forefront. In this context, the North's forcible reunification with the South, expansion of the size and scope of the central government, and implementation of Henry Clay's American System all fused into a single coherent objective. While America's war for national unification would have looked profoundly different without slavery, simultaneous unification movements succeeded elsewhere without slavery as the precipitating condition. Federal systems with a high degree of local autonomy, however, obstructed this political and economic transformation. Consolidation came at the expense of these more

informal systems. The U.S. ceased being a federal union in 1865 and became a nation. One part of America decided that the whole United States would become a modern, liberal, unitary nation-state.

In contrast to the nineteenth century's revolutionary nationalists, Bender contends, disunion had been imaginable to the Founding generation. For them, unity in itself had been neither the highest end nor necessarily the guarantor of either republican government or liberty. For romantic nationalists, however, disunion became inconceivable. "Since [the] nation was now being identified with unified national space, division was understood as reduction. Without unity there was no nation; without a nation, there was no liberty. Such thinking was a long way from Jefferson's; a unified nation had become an absolute, an end in itself." The South quite simply by 1860 could conceive of republicanism, constitutionalism, and liberty apart from the union and could certainly conceive of a union enduring without a centralized nation-state. From an international perspective, then, Lincoln did not preserve the Union. Rather, he waged a war of national consolidation to found a modern nation-state to replace the Union. Even his rhetoric during the war shifted gradually away from the word "union" to the words "nation" and "national." In the Gettysburg Address, Bender emphasizes, Lincoln "promised a rebirth of freedom in a *nation*, a democratic nation, and he offered it as a model for all humankind."

By situating the United States as "a nation among nations" in this way, Bender inevitably and intentionally dismantles American exceptionalism. Since the rise of the modern nation-state coincided with the birth of modern historical method in the nineteenth century, historians ever since, Bender contends, have considered the nation to be the obvious and appropriate unit of historical analysis. This in turn has led historians to emphasize those features of national history that worked to make nations unique from all others. In the case of the United States, this tendency produced a powerful exceptionalist narrative, one that reinforced Americans' habit of defining their identity by how they differ from others. One consequence of this tendency has been Americans' reluctance to see their overseas expansion as a product of authentic, European-style empire-building. In Bender's judgment, the United States looks very much like the other colonial powers in the later nineteenth century.

In writing about empire in the 1890s, Bender returns to one of his main objectives: the need for Americans to see themselves as others see them. "A global perspective," he writes, "invites and demands examination of the way American presumptions and policies were understood by those affected by them, and how the American empire looked from the outside." Despite how radical this advice may sound, Bender actually needs to take it further. He fails to consider in the first place whether any nation or empire in history has ever achieved this degree of self-knowledge. If he is asking why Americans in 1898 failed to think more like post-modernists, then he is not asking a historical question. Did any nation in Europe see itself through the eyes of others? Did

Japan or China for that matter? For some reason this highly abstract way of thinking about oneself applies only to the United States. Similarly, Bender also fails to place the United States' sense of its "civilizing mission" in the global context of other nations' equally powerful consciousness of having been chosen by divine providence, history, or fate, or natural selection. In writing about empire, then, Bender actually needs an even wider lens, the sort of lens he uses to such good effect in the book's final chapter on the rise of social democracy as a global phenomenon.

Despite their ideological differences (and despite the fact that America's status as a dangerous nation bothers Bender but inspires Kagan), there are significant points of convergence between *A Nation Among Nations* and *Dangerous Nation*. Both Bender and Kagan argue that America has always been a restless, ambitious nation that has wielded power consciously in the pursuit of territorial and ideological ambitions. Both emphasize America's pattern of interventionism. Both challenge the myth of America as a largely peaceful, isolated nation that unintentionally acquired an empire. For neither author does 1898 mark an "aberration" or "departure" in the long continuity of U.S. foreign policy. They agree, moreover, that the rest of the world has perceived America, in Bender's words, "as greedy and dangerous, as an enemy." And both reevaluate American exceptionalism, Kagan retaining America's fated ideological mission, Bender replacing the "parochialisms and arrogance" of the old exceptionalist narrative with a global history that enables Americans to understand themselves more modestly as "a people among peoples."

Regardless of what facts and interpretations Kagan or Bender gets right or wrong about America's history and place in the world, these two books raise inescapable challenges about the nation's history, identity, and posture toward the rest of the world. America has always had at least two temperaments at war within its soul, one restless, Promethean, and eager to change the world, one settled, conservative, and deeply skeptical of man's moral and intellectual capacity to remake the world. In 1866, not long before the Reverend Zincke toured post–Civil War America, the political theorist Orestes Brownson surveyed the national political landscape. He argued that the reunited states had an opportunity to decide which kind of democracy they would become, and these options corresponded to three temperaments within the American character: the extreme "personal democracy" of the secessionists, the extreme "humanitarian democracy" of the abolitionists, and the "territorial democracy" of the old union. The South's centrifugal "egoist" democracy had been soundly defeated, and for that Brownson was grateful. What remained, however, was a struggle between a restrained, decentralized territorial democracy and the philanthropic humanitarians' never-ending revolution to reconstitute man and society.[14] If Brownson's or some other interpretation of the American soul is correct,

[14] Orestes Brownson, *The American Republic: Its Constitution, Tendencies and Destiny*, with a new introduction by Peter Augustine Lawler (Wilmington, Del.: ISI Books, 2003), p. 224ff.

the challenge for the historian is to understand which of these temperaments has predominated at which points in American history and with what consequences, aside from any policy implications or ideological agenda. The challenge for policymakers, regardless of whether the past in all its complexity and incongruities and ironies serves the needs of the moment or not, is to judge which of these temperaments truly promotes America's well being. The policy debate will endure as long as the nation endures. The historical debate will endure far longer.

The Most Protestant Nation
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